

MOCK DEMOCRACIES: AUTHORITARIAN COVER-UPS

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Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War

Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way

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As ideological challenges to the West dissipated after the end of the Cold War, many authoritarian regimes found themselves political and economic orphans. In this context, a new breed of hybrid regime emerged—democratic in appearance but authoritarian in nature. The democratic aspects of these regimes were mostly a product of the desire to conform to Western norms in order to access aid as well as political good standing.

From 1990 to 1995, thirty-five authoritarian regimes were supplanted by façade democracies in Latin America, Eastern Europe, Africa and Asia. These countries are the focus of *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War*, by Steven Levitsky, professor of government at Harvard University, and Lucan A. Way, assistant professor of political science at the University of Toronto. The authors provide a comprehensive study of the trajectories of the regimes that became “competitive” authoritarian states during the post–Cold War period, with a look at the drivers that shaped their evolution.

Levitsky and Way first introduce the concept of competitive authoritarianism as “civilian regimes in which formal democratic institutions exist but . . . they are not democratic because the playing field is heavily skewed in favor of incumbents.”¹ Second, they offer an innovative theory, supported by empirical analysis, explaining why some countries democratized while others did not. They offer an almost formulaic analysis to situate regimes within a set of common variables, which allows for a classification method that makes states as diverse as Mexico, Taiwan and Croatia fit comfortably together into a single profile.

Levitsky and Way make the case that three independent factors determine whether a competitive authoritarian regime will become fully democratic or not: its linkage with states in the West, the leverage of the West on the regime and the regime’s organizational capacity. Linkage to the West is defined as “the density of ties (economic, political, diplomatic, social, and organizational) and cross-border flows (of capital, goods and services, people, and information).”² This is the most crucial of the three variables, according to the authors. Devoting one section of the


book to states with high linkages to the West, they demonstrate how these regimes almost invariably democratized, regardless of context or background.

Another section focuses on regimes that the authors classify as having weaker linkages to the West, such as post-Soviet states and many countries in Africa and Asia. In these cases, the authors tie the outcome of political development to the other two variables (i.e., the leverage of the West and the regimes' organizational capacities). For example, Benin and Mali, both dependent on foreign aid, are especially susceptible to Western leverage. In addition, their regimes' organizational capacities were low in the post-Cold War period. The product of these circumstances enabled the institutionalization of Western-style democracies in these states. On the contrary, though Western leverage with respect to the government of Zimbabwe was also high, this state failed to democratize. The authors explain this outcome as a direct result of the regime's operational capacity embodied in President Robert Mugabe's coercive apparatus.³ The Zimbabwean state descended from the military and has an impressive ability to brutally repress dissenting voices and media criticism, as well as to deflect external influence. Hence, despite the economic and political leverage of the West, the regime prevailed.

The authors' approach is a departure from more traditional scholarly assessments of the causes of regime change. Many scholars explain democratization as a product of domestic factors, such as the influence of individual leaders or economic growth and subsequent modernization, or as the result of organized civil resistance. Others subscribe to the theory of social choice, which states that individual values will aggregate toward collective choice, and believe that democracy is circumstantially deferrable but ultimately inexorable. While these views certainly matter, Levitsky and Way's premise anchors on a more practical point of view. Their argument is rooted in a set of objective, external variables that work well for comparing circumstantially different cases. Moreover, rather than preaching their method for all cases, their study can accommodate more conventional factors that lead to democratization. For example, they credit civil resistance for Ukraine's democratic changeover. However, the authors also demonstrate how Ukraine's low organizational capacity and the leverage of countries in the West were important conditions that led to the Orange Revolution.

However, one limitation of their theory is its time- and context-specific nature. While it shows how geopolitics can drive national political evolution, it is limited to the post-Cold War period. At the time, the socioeconomic and political ideologies of the West were practically hegemonic. But as the world becomes multipolar and developing countries begin to question the value of democracy, this theory may not have much predictive power in the future. For instance, many states have strong links to countries like China, which does not put a high value on democracy.

Different and sometimes opposing views about which values are most important are all having global influence. In some cases, citizens may favor economic growth, social order or military dominance in place of democracy. Two decades after the end of the Cold War, it is hard to imagine how the world could again be dominated by one set of values or ideas.

Even so, the concept of competitive authoritarianism described by Levitsky and Way has great explanatory power for describing the past and also for describing regimes that are an important part of the geopolitical arena today. Chávez's Venezuela and Putin's Russia are almost seamlessly consistent with Levitsky and Way's definition and also demonstrate how the democratic elements of a regime can be used as a tool to gain both internal and external legitimacy. This concept, both highly original and highly valuable, is the book's best asset and suggests that it will have a long life in the political-science literature on authoritarianism. 

NOTES

¹ Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 5.

² *Ibid.*, 43.

³ *Ibid.*, 238–46.